



U.S. Slaps Egypt on Human Rights Record and Ties to North Korea



President Trump met with President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt in April in the Oval Office. Stephen Crowley/The New York Times

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WASHINGTON — The Trump administration on Tuesday denied Egypt \$96 million in aid and delayed \$195 million in military funding because of concerns over Egypt’s human rights record and its cozy relationship with North Korea.

Analysts said they were surprised by the moves, which followed an Oval Office meeting in April between President Trump and [President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi](#) of Egypt, during which Mr. Trump lavished praise on the military strongman.

“I just want to let everybody know, in case there was any doubt, that we are very much behind President el-Sisi,” Mr. Trump said. “He’s done a fantastic job in a very difficult situation. We are very much behind Egypt and the people of Egypt. The United States has, believe me, backing, and we have strong backing.”

Egypt is among the largest recipients of United States aid. But on Tuesday, the State Department confirmed that it was curtailing its funding to the country because of its lack of progress in human rights and a new law restricting the activities of nongovernmental organizations.

Asked if Egypt’s robust relationship with North Korea played a role in Tuesday’s action, a State Department official would say only that issues of concern have been raised with Cairo, but refused to provide details about the talks.

While Mr. Sisi [approved the new law](#) almost two months after his meeting with Mr. Trump, concerns over Egypt’s human rights record and its relationship with North Korea have been percolating for years.

Robert Satloff, the executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said the conflicting messages from the Trump administration were surprising.

“It is unusual that the Trump administration would take a punitive measure against Egypt, given the president’s outreach to President Sisi and his general embrace of this Egyptian government,” Mr. Satloff said. “I would not say reports of difficulties with Egypt’s human rights situation or its connection with North Korea are new.”

Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson’s top priority has been to increase North Korea’s economic and diplomatic isolation, and he has asked foreign leaders in almost every meeting that they cut ties with Pyongyang.

Egypt has been close with North Korea since at least the 1970s. North Korean pilots trained Egyptian fighter pilots before the 1973 war with Israel, and Egypt was later accused of supplying Scud missiles to North Korea, said Daniel Leone of the Project on Middle East Democracy.

This year, United Nations investigators said they acquired evidence of North Korean trade in “hitherto unreported items such as encrypted military communications, man-portable air defense systems, air defense systems and satellite-guided missiles” in the Middle East and Africa, among other locations.

In 2015, a United Nations panel said that Egypt’s Port Said was being used by North Korean front companies and shipping agents engaged in weapons smuggling.

Successive American administrations have [privately raised the issue of North Korea in talks with Cairo](#), but with little success. The United States may be pressuring Egypt over its civilian and military links to North Korea. One of Egypt’s richest men, Naguib Sawiris, owns Orascom Telecom Media and Technology, the telecommunications company that helped set up North Korea’s main cellular telephone network in 2008.

Another factor in the decision to limit funding to Egypt is the draconian law regulating aid agencies — particularly those funded by Western governments and organizations — which was signed into law by Mr. Sisi in late May. Several Egyptian groups, including those working with victims of police torture, said the law will make it impossible for them to continue their work and may force them to shut down.

The Trump administration has proposed significant cutbacks in foreign aid and has promised to demand greater accountability from aid recipients.

But Tuesday’s actions were not as tough as they might have been. By pausing the provision of \$195 million in military funding, the Trump administration saved the money from expiring entirely on Sept. 30. This way, Egypt could eventually get the money if its record on human rights improves.